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AUTHOR Ascher, Carol
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ABSTRACT

Decisions about whether to promote a student should be made on a variety of both academic and social grounds, and the curriculum should be restructured to meet the student's needs if retention is chosen. As with other academic/punitive measures, poor Blacks and Hispanics tend to be retained disproportionate to their numbers because minorities are likely to be perceived as low-achieving and/or troublesome students. Negative effects of retention include the following: (1) no short- or long-term improvement in academic achievement; (2) stigma; (3) low self-esteem; (4) lack of interest in extracurricular activities; (5) waning motivation; and (6) increased chance of dropping out at a later age. Retention has been found to be beneficial when used with immature elementary students in the early grades, who are not opposed to being retained, and whose parents support the decision. Student characteristics to consider in determining retention include the following: (1) chronological age; (2) present grade; (3) knowledge of English; (4) previous retentions; (5) age/grade difference between siblings; (6) estimate of intelligence; (7) history of learning disabilities; and (8) attitude toward retention. Effective curricula for students who have failed include the following: (1) promotion with remedial instruction; (2) transitional classes with other failed or at-risk students; (3) retention with remediation; (4) partial promotion and summer school; and (5) special education. A list of 14 references is included. (FMW)

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GRADE RETENTION: MAKING THE DECISION

According to a recent poll, 70 percent of all public school parents believe that policies for promotion from grade to grade should be stricter (Gallup, 1986). Parents may have become concerned about "low standards" because of publicity about our poor national school achievement. They also may be influenced by the current belief that "social promotions"—promoting a child solely on the basis of chronological age—are not the solution to high retention rates.

Many educators today propose minimum competency tests as a spur to raise achievement for all students. Yet failure rates on these tests are high in most urban schools, and, inadvertently, they may even be resulting in increased grade retention (Walker & Madhere, 1987).

Despite the increasing popularity of competency tests, retention policies still differ from school to school. Although systematic retention data are scarce, overall retention in elementary schools across the country ranges from 12 to 15 percent (Bucko, 1986). In New York City, which is not unique among large cities in this regard, a third of all general education students are above age for their grades, and in the ninth to twelfth grades over half are above the standard age (New York City Board of Education, 1986).

Contrary to some common sense psychology, the threat of repetition does not appear to motivate students to do better. Further, repeating a year's curriculum does not raise a student's achievement either in the short- or long-run (Walker & Madhere, 1987). Often students learn less during the second year in a given grade. When they do show initial advances during the retention year, they slide back thereafter (Overman, 1986). Moreover, there are negative effects from repeating; stigma, low self-esteem, a lack of interest in extracurricular activities, and waning motivation are the most frequently cited (Bowen & Lipkowitz, 1985).

Evidence is also growing that students retained in the elementary grades tend to be those who drop out later on (Schultz, et al. 1986). Although retention may not cause dropping out, there is a strong connection. A Cincinnati Public School analysis of the system's dropout data, for example, found that students with one retention had a 40-50 percent chance of dropping out of school, those with two retentions had a 60-70 percent chance, and those with three retentions rarely graduated (OERI Urban Superintendents Network, 1987).

Although many educators have kept track of the research and are rightfully skeptical about the educational value of retention, they believe that there are few viable alternatives, and thus commonly continue to offer retention plans. They argue that, even if retention does not improve learning, it enforces the value of a diploma. However, as Holmes and Mathews (1984, p. 233) point out in a comprehensive research review, because the research evidence so consistently shows that the negative effects outweigh the positive outcomes for individual students, "the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many other plans have failed."

Characteristics of Retainees

As with suspensions and other academic/punitive measures, poor blacks and Hispanics tend to be retained disproportionate to their numbers. Because minorities are most likely to be seen as low achieving and/or troublesome students, they have retention rates three to four times higher than those of white students (Jackson, 1975). Among blacks, males are particularly at-risk (Gary, 1987). In court hearings claiming prejudice in the dispensation of retentions, the courts have generally upheld the decisions as academically-based. However, in several cases where a disproportionate number of blacks failed to perform satisfactorily on standardized tests, particularly if the school system was previously segregated, the courts have asked school systems to justify their retention/promotion policy (Stroup & Zirkel, 1983).

The Usefulness of Retention

Some young children do benefit from retention, particularly if it is accompanied by new instruction. Retention has been found successful—and less likely to have negative side effects—when used with immature, elementary school students, especially first or second graders, who are not opposed to being retained, whose teacher has confidence in the retention decision, and whose parents accept the decision and can work with the child at home. The crucial variable here appears to be the chance a child is given for additional instruction and further maturation (Bucko, 1986; Walker & Madhere, 1987). On the other hand, children with very low intelligence and achievement, or poor emotional development, may do better in a special education program (Walker & Madhere, 1987). When parents do not support the retention, the child rarely gains by it. And retention above the sixth grade has little benefit for any student. In fact, the higher the elementary grade level, the more likely that a student will do better in an alternative program (Overman, 1986).

Useful Variables to Consider in Determining Retention

Retention on the basis of any single test is inappropriate and unfair. Any method of determining whether or not a student should be promoted must be based on many variables, both academic and social. Two models, one by Light (1981) and another by Lieberman (1980) can usefully guide administrators' retention decisions. The student variables common to both models include:

- Chronological age: the younger, the better.
- Present grade: the lower, the more likely the success.
- Knowledge of English: teaching English to limited English speaking students is more effective than retention.
- Previous retentions: one unsuccessful retention suggests subsequent retentions will not be effective either.

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- Age/grade difference between siblings: retention is less effective if the retainee is placed in the same grade as a younger sibling.
- Estimate of intelligence: students of average intelligence are better retention candidates than either very bright students or those below peer average.
- History of learning disabilities: indicates poor prognosis for successful retentions.
- Attitude toward retention: students retained willingly are better candidates than those who oppose retention.

Effective Curricula for Students Who Have Failed

Recycling a child through the same or a similar curriculum, with the same teacher, has no value. The curriculum following the failure of a whole grade or courses in it must be given serious attention. A student who fails can be offered:

- promotion with remedial instruction in unmastered skills.
- transitional classes with other failed or at-risk students.
- retention with remediation.
- partial promotion and summer school.
- special education.

Being placed among regular students is often better for the low achiever because it eliminates the discouragement and labeling that occur in special classes for retainees. On the other hand, students can make real achievement gains in special classes directed at specific skills areas. Given the emotional liabilities of isolation from the mainstream, schools should be particularly certain that the instruction in the alternative class is directed to the skills needs of the students (Walker & Madhere, 1987). Unfortunately, until now, most schools have been unwilling to expend needed resources on those students who are already "failures."

Conclusion

Responsible decisions about whether to promote a student must be made on a variety of both academic and social grounds. Decisions cannot be a matter of either social promotion or narrowly defined academic merit. The numerous alternatives to retention should be carefully considered, and when retention is chosen—preferably as a last resort—the curriculum should be restructured and enriched in ways to meet the needs of the student. Whichever programs a school creates, it must acknowledge that when a high proportion of any classroom or school fails, not only the children are responsible. Schools and communities need to be responsible for finding the necessary resources to turn their substantial retained population into successful students.

—Carol Ascher

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban Minority Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
(212) 678-3433
Erwin Flaxman, Director
Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor

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